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ABSTRACT

An examination of the role of journalists in the political process suggests that although there has been some reflective analysis by journalists on the potentially distorting consequences of routine news procedures, most journalists seem reluctant to acknowledge any such distortion. An analysis of the media coverage of two political scenarios (the withdrawal of Thomas Eagleton as the vice-presidential candidate of the Democratic party in 1972 and the resignation of Bert Lance as the director of the Office of Management and the Budget in 1977) revealed the following similarities to be generally true across the media: certain themes were selected and, repeated over time, came to be seen as real and relevant facts: the media appeared to be paramount in influencing the decisions of the two men: and the news media relied on a narrow focus rather than placing various events in context. (AEA)

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LEARNING FROM MISTAKES: TOWARD A REFLECTIVE JOURNALISM

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Researchers, teachers, and those who actually are involved in the daily production of news messages share a deep concern with improving the quality of public information in general, and in particular, making news messages as valid, realistic, and as useful as possible for anyone interested in gaining a better understanding of the facts surrounding a particular event and what the broader significance of that event may be. Any hope of accomplishing the awesome task of developing a better informed news media will necessarily require the insights, contributions--and perhaps even the mistakes--of researchers, practitioners, and most importantly, the journalism educators who train future journalists. The following brief remarks are intended to offer one means to improve the quality of our public information.

Without entering into a lengthy and necessarily controversial debate about the "real purpose" of journalism, I will just state that it should be--if nothing else--a way for citizens to obtain realistic and valid information about events, processes, and the consequences of each for their own lives, and those of others. But achieving this purpose becomes exceedingly difficult when complex events are involved, and especially when public officials and various organizations and groups seek to develop a favorable impression by managing their media images, (cf, Altheide and Johnson, 1979), Moreover, a number of studies have demonstrated that the mass media themselves often play a large role in public events in general, and the governmental process in particular (Altheide, 1976; Epstein, 1973; Cohen & Young, 1973; Molotch & Lester, 1974; Rosho, 1973; Batscha, 1975).

Such considerations suggest that one ingredient in news portrayals of events is the role of the news media themselves, and that an understanding of this involvement can shed some light on possible errors in judgment, or outright mistakes, in order to improve future news coverage. In short, I think it is worthwhile to ask if mistakes can be recognized in past news events, and if so, can procedures, etc. be improved to possibly avoid similar mistakes in future coverage? The idea then, is to strive to obtain cumulative knowledge about news coverage, including the various sources of distortion, inappropriate interpretations, etc. so that similar mistakes will not be repeated.

The hardest part in improving newswork is to recognize mistakes. Moreover, before this can occur, there must be a willingness to acknowledge that mistakes are possible, and a realization that the news process itself can lead to systematic distortion, and thereby deprive the public from a more adequate understanding. The works of Friendly (1967) and Schorr (1977) provide numerous samples of the distorting impact of organizational and pratical concerns of newswork. The mistakes I am interested in are not simply those involving misquotes, or incorrect facts; these are readily observable, and simply corrected. I am referring to the emphasis and interpretations given an event, or a series of events, that are based on assumptions incompatible with the reality and complexity of those events. These usually surface after the fact, after, say, a politician has been drummed out of office. Moreover, they are often pointed out by both scholars and prominent journalists. For example, my analysis of the way the events of Watergate were distorted by conceptually joining discrete events, and calling them all "Watergate," (cf. Altheide, 1976: 155-72), has essentially been confirmed by Nicholas Von Hoffman's assertion that

the media were out to get Nixon (Penthouse, March, 1977).

The inspiration and origin for what may later turn out to be seen as mistakes, is usually--especially in TV news--the way the news process is organized. For example, in television, the constraints of producing short, visual, and entertaining messages about otherwise complex events has prompted broadcast journalists to rely on presentational forms that tend to emphasize or "thematize" larger issues and matters that cannot be shown visually; instead, the visual material is presented as illustrating the more abstract situation. On individual stories, predefined angles may be used. Weaver and his associates (Ferguson, 1972) found that television coverage of certain presidential candidates was influenced by themes carried over from one story to another (cf. Altheide, 1976: 127).

> Edmund Muskie. Television news coverage of Senator Muskie was overwhelmingly dominated by a single theme--that of the 'front-runner'...Muskie attempted to portray himself as the candidate of trust and of hope, the enemy of division, the unifier of his party and his country. But the newsmen interpreted this stance largely as a mere tactic of the front-runner who employs only empty rhetoric because he does not wish to risk losing any of his support by taking clearcut stands.

There is nothing wrong with this procedure, as long as the broader context is accurately portrayed, and reflects actual happenings in the world. Too often, however, this is not the case; themes are selected more for their practical, and predefined utility in making sense out of some events, rather than seeking to systematically check out their validity (cf. Weaver 1972; Epstein, 1975). Most importantly, once selected, themes become reified through repetition and eventually come to be seen as the objective reality which the themes were presumed to somehow reflect in the first place. Overlooking the role of journalism in the process, and not realizing the impact such reporting can have on events themselves, can distort events and lead

to very serious mistakes about reality.

Before discussing certain mistakes which have not yet been recognized, I will note some instance where journalists have learned a great deal from past efforts and have subsequently improved their performance. One is the role of journalists in the political process, and especially the meaning of certain primary races for the original outcome. In the past, news, and especially TV news, has sought to find significance in certain primary elections, and not surprisingly, often found it. The problem is that this has often created a self-fulfilling—or self-defeating—prophecy for a candidate. The best, if not most recent example, occurred in 1972 with Senator Edward Muskie. When it became established via the mass media that the man from Maine would be disappointed, and indeed, actually a loser, if he received less than 50% of the vote in his home state, the stage was set for dramatic anticipation. When he received only 47%, which was more than any other candidate, he was declared a loser. He subsequently withdrew from the race. Some members of the press have learned from this, and similar incidents, as they have more fully realized that their messages and interpretations can have important consequences for political decision-making. For example, on the eve of the first primary during the 1976 presidential campaign, CBS correspondent Roger Mudd responded to Walter Cronkite's question about the significance of "tomorrow's vote," by saying that he felt it would have the significance that people in the media say it will have. Of course, other correspondents then went on to discuss what the significance would "really be," but the Mudd reflection, was a positive step in the right direction. There are other examples of media's reflection and education involving such issues as televising terrorist tactics, etc.

But there remain important problem areas to more adequate reflection. One is the tendency to emphasize certain generalizing themes and to then search an event for the evidence to fit it. A good example is the case of Senator Thomas Eagleton's acceptance, and then withdrawl, as the Democratic vice-presidential nominee in 1972 (Altheide, 1977). When it was learned that Eagleton had been treated for "mental illness", and specifically, "fatigue and nervous exhaustion," and that he had received shock treatments, great pressure was brought to bear on McGovern to have him resign. My analysis of the news coverage of this case makes it rather clear that the greatest pressure was from the mass media. Collectively, the media stressed Eagleton's liability to McGovern, a point emphasized by the country's major newspapers editorializing for his withdrawl. Then more specific charges were labelled such as his alleged "drinking problem"—which was never proven, and ultimately retracted by Jack Anderson. Indeed, during the week after the disclosure of his history of treatment, nothing else was said about Eagleton, except that he would surely resign—he would have to—and that he had not been honest with McGovern. After Eagleton resigned he told a CBS interviewer:

> It was sort of my personal belief that the Eagleton issue would fade away through this month of August, around the first day of August...I thought that (CBS reporter) would get tired of asking me in every city of the country about my health, and that it would run its course (CBS, Aug. 1, 1972).

As is quite common in instances where journalists harp on a theme, specific examples of the theme are developed, but most importantly, the journalists forget their own role in the process and tend to treat the coverage as though it was some objective reality. For example, following a week of stressing all the reasons why Eagleton could not be effective, and why

McGovern would be severely hurt by his continued presence, a CBS correspondent summed up the coverage of "The Eagleton Case" with:

> Already the issues have gone from shock treatment, to Eagleton's candor, to McGovern's judgment, to the meeting tomorrow (between McGovern and Eagleton)...How they deal with each other from now on will shape the campaign and influence the election; it will tell us a good deal more about them than we know— perhaps even more than they know about themselves (CBS, July 30, 1972).

Of course, McGovern realized that he could not possibly win the election without the support of the media, and especially if they continued to challenge the competency and trustworthiness of his running mate. Following Eagleton's exit from the ticket, McGovern said:

> (I) was of the opinion that this issue would continue to plague the campaign. Ladies and gentlemen, look at the press, at the news, at the magazines. This has been the issue that has blotted out the war, blotted out the economy, blotted out all the central questions before the nation (CBS, Aug. 1, 1972).

Two months after the Eagleton affair, thoughtful journalists reflected on the media impact. One said:

> ...although I think individual reporters played it very straight, the total thing was a kind of circus, and I don't know how to explain it. I think it has something to do with there not being any other news that week, or something like that. But the total thing was very bad (NBC, Sept. 26, 1972).

Another said:

> A great opportunity (was lost) to listen, and to test the maturity of the American public on an issue that we never tried to sort of toss out to them...(to) do some very, very good reporting on the realities of mental health, mental illness and hospitalization...(but) all that was lost in the tumult.

If one is willing to concede that perhaps the press did play an important role in the Eagleton affair, and that perhaps certain points were stressed to the detriment of a more complete understanding about his qualifications, voting record, and the complex and ambiguous character of mental illness, etc. The next step is to ask: what did the press learn from the Eagleton case? Was any serious effort made to unravel what

had been involved in shaping the content of the various reports, and particularly the various emphases noted above? My guarded conclusion is that little serious reflection on the nature and impact of stressing certain themes has occurred. Indeed, to most journalists I have discussed this issue with, the idea that themes, predefined angles, or whatever one might call them, even play a role in continuing coverage of a major event, is absurd.

A more recent case where any lessons learned from the Eagleton story could have been applied is the one involving Bert Lance. My continuing analysis of the news coverage of the Lance case indicates that a dominant theme appeared, and was accepted by most news media, namely that Lance was either corrupt or of sufficiently compromised business and personal ethics that he could not be morally qualified for his job as director of the Office of Managemnet and the Budget. This theme was then highlighted with specific angles, including,: (1) his bank overdrafts; (2) correspondent relations with other banks; (3) charges that Lance had assisted a "crook" in obtaining a loan, and that he was part of an embezzlement scheme; and (4) charges that Lance had a hand in delaying a F.B.I. investigation of his business practices. All of these charges, with the exception of the "continuing investigation" by the justice department of the alleged delay in the F.B.I. investigation, have either been set aside or defined as "legal", but questionable. Nevertheless, the various news media indirectly, and some directly through editorials, painted a dismal picture of the former Georgian banker.[1] Many significant complexities were either overlooked or underemphasized in the Lance story in favor of stressing the negative tone of the total inquiry. A few specifics include the testimony by Mr. Heinemann, of the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency. He stressed that:

> Correspondent relationships per se are not bad. They are a very important segment of the banking industry and provide important services throughout the banking industry, to serve, after all, the people of this country and the industry of this country... I've noticed that there has been a great deal of discussion about correspondent relationships in the press, and I would like to take this opportunity to say that the correspondent relationship itself should not be looked at as some deep, dark or mysterious system.

On the basis of this testimony and information from others knowledgeable about banking practices, the most that could be said about Lance's banking practices was that they were "somewhat irregular" or "ambiguous." Specifically, even though Heinemann was willing to say that perhaps Lance had made "some past errors in judgment," he gave the following assessment of the news treatment accorded Lance:

> I think that the treatment of Mr. Lance has been somewhat excessive, that there clearly was a pattern of commenting on allegations, many of which were unfounded. And that—and this is a personal opinion—is unfair.

Yet another factor was overlooked by most media reports except for the MacNeil/Lehrer report on PBS: the good reputation Lance had among federal banking examiners. Robert MacNeil stated on Sept. 15, 1977:

> Mr. Lance added it was ironic he was defending himself against charges that he was inept as a banker. On three separate occasions while he was president of the National Bank of Georgia, he said, the Comptroller's office asked them to take over failing banks in the area to protect depositors.

The various news reports, and especially those on television, sidestepped the nature of complex banking practices, including the vast differences in banking operations in various parts of the country. Rather, they often appeared to be more interested in using President Carter's standards of honesty and removing "even the appearance of impropriety," from his administration. Indeed, after Lance resigned, ABC's Sam Donaldson asked the President if he felt Lance still did not have the "appearance of impropriety." This perspective was well presented by one of Lance's examiners, Senator William Roth:

> This is not a court of law. We are not here to determine Mr. Lance's guilt or innocence regarding any violation of law...This committee wants to give him every opportunity to answer the allegations that have been raised. But I think it's only fair to say to you, Mr. Lance, that based on the evidence of record the burden of proof has shifted to you to show that your actions are consistent with the President's high ethical standards, the standards expected of a person in a position of high public trust.

There is also evidence that journalists overlooked many facts and understandings about banking practices that could have defused the Lance allegations. For example, when William Sexton, Associate Editor of Newsday, was interviewed by Robert MacNeil concerning his magazine's call for Lance's resignation, he rather sheeplishly noted that overdrafts may not be all that bad, and perhaps not that uncommon:

> ...I not only have an overdraft myself even as we speak, but my checking account is with a fairly good-sized bank in the New York metropolitan area which sends me letters every once in a while encouraging me to make the overdraft larger.

This editor acknowledged a bit later that the media may have "buffaloed" Lance because of:

> having developed this momentum...there is a rush to judgment on the part of the newspaper editorial writers, on the part of the White House press corps..."

But the editor can only conclude that somehow "fate has treated him (Lance) unfairly."

Interestingly enough, one of the only people to challenge what the media were doing, and the political clout of constantly being bombarded with allegations, was Senator Thomas Eagleton. On Sept. 16 he said:

> Back in the late 1940's and early 1950's, the technique and the mode of the time was guilt by association, the way Senator Joseph McCarthy made it a fine art to practice... Here, in 1977, we have a newer technique: guilt by accumulation. It seems that every day someone will hurl a charge at Mr. Lance, and regardless of whether it's true or false, it accumulates. A little bit more mud gets on the character and reputation of

> Mr. Lance, and the veracity of the charge or the basis of the charge is almost irrelevant; the charges are made.

After Eagleton gave an example of the process by noting how he learned about the new charge on Sept. 5 via the mass media that Lance was in all likelihood "a tax fraud and a cheat," and Eagleton said:

> Yesterday Senator Percy apologized to Mr. Lance, and in his apology used this curious language: He said, 'I apologize for any anguish I may have caused you over the weekend.' Marvelous...We're playing with a man's character and his decency and his reputation, and more is at stake than just a little momentary anguish over the weekend...some people will believe forever that Bert Lance is a tax fraud cheater. And I say, gentlemen, that we cannot play so fast and loose with the reputation of <u>any</u> person.

And Eagleton should know about the consequences of such work. Of course, Lance resigned, and in all likelihood, did so with Carter's urging. But Carter, as the foremost media politician of all time, knows that one cannot survive a hostile press, and that regardless of what the public really thought about Lance, the various congressional committees, and even party supporters, could not tolerate the public charge of having corrupt people in the government, especially with an election year approaching. This aspect of media presentation has been overlooked in other analyses of the Lance case (cf. Germond and Witcover, 1977; Diamond, 1978).

<u>CONCLUSION</u>

I find many similarities in the media coverage of the Eagleton and Lance cases. First, it can be shown that certain simplified themes were selected—perhaps unwittingly. Over time, and with enough repetition, they came to be seen as real and relevant facts. Second, the role of the media appears to have been paramount in influencing the decisions of McGovern and Carter respectively, regarding their media-damaged aides. Third, and most importantly, the news media made the same kinds of mistakes in both cases, including relying on an

exceedingly narrow focus rather than placing the various events in context, and presenting a fuller picture. Yet, with very few exceptions, the news media seemed reluctant to acknowledge the part they played in the scenario, nor did they seem aware of the role the news production process itself played in the messages that were presented. We can only hope that future coverage of similar kinds of events and scenarios will benefit from reflective analysis about the potentially distorting consequences of routine news procedures, and that steps will be taken to correct them.

FOOTNOTES

1. The media coverage helped spur a continuing, 20 month investigation of Lance, which ultimately led to a grand jury's indictment of the Georgian banker and two associates, two years later in May, 1979.

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